

From the Basement: Stories about Geeks, Gamers, and Freaks

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By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a creative work of fiction in the form of one novella and four short stories. The collection is a work of humour and entertainment. “The Coin Collective” delves into the cut-throat world of cosplay, “The Dead of Waynesboro” follows Declan Mortel as he tries to create the ultimate zombie movie in true gothic fashion, “220 Torren Mill Road” is an epistolary horror story about a whack-job mother and her game-addicted son, “Dragon’s Lair Comics & Collectables” is set during a Magic the Gathering tournament and questions ‘what makes a monster?’, and Chemical Connection explores drug and raver culture through an eclectic variety of characters.

I hope the collection will speak to an entire generation of self-described and closet geeks. For those without intimate knowledge of the material, I endeavoured to exhibit, even expose, aspects of specific subcultures, shedding light on the basement dwellers who inhabit them.

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You've all helped this Level 18 Computer Ninja Mage, attain a subclass in Writing, proficient in wielding one-handed pens and two-handed keyboards.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Growing up, I thought I was cursed. I couldn't understand why I was so drawn to the fantasy genre and to gaming. I did, however, learn to hide that passion while wading through the murky waters of the public education system. The way I saw it, in order to survive, I had two options: abandon my love for geeky things by adopting a more acceptable sports-loving, girl-chasing, school-hating persona, or shroud my passion by banishing it to the basement, both figuratively and literally. I chose the latter.

In the 90s, my life consisted of attending school by day and geeking out by night. I played Dungeons & Dragons, Magic the Gathering, console games, dressed up as heroes and villains, and acted out scenes from my favourite nerdy movies with a close group of like-minded geeks. The worlds we created, strategies we conjured, and the games we played became our own secret adventures.

When time came to decide the theme of my thesis, the answer was already deep within me. Throughout the MFA we were taught to follow our passion and write what we know. I believe the Klingons say it best: *'Iwllj ghogh yIQoy*, or *"Listen to the voice of your blood."*¹ I decided to take readers into my passion, into my basement.

Writing *From the Basement: Stories about Geeks, Gamers, and Freaks* was an opportunity for me to explore the realm of the unpopular, drawing inspiration from the geek within. A collection of short stories and novella was my preferred format in showcasing the colorful variety of nerdy, geeky activities and subcultures from my youth. There were simply too many characters, themes, and esoteric subjects floating around my head for just one tale. Alternating genres and formats allowed me to explore the content from many angles. The collection was arranged to move from the lighthearted road trip genre, down into the darkness of the gothic and horror genres, much like exploring a shadowy, strange basement. The range of genres fit with my belief as to how geeks, gamers, and freaks were perceived by those outside their cultural circles. They were misunderstood, pitied, mocked, bullied, and even feared.

The use of genre fiction came naturally, being a child of the 80s. I grew up loving Star Trek, Conan the Barbarian movies, D&D, cheesy zombie movies, and what is now considered retro gaming. Writing these pastimes into pop fiction was the most organic way to explore the material. I also wanted to set the collection specifically during the turn of the century to present selected subcultures at the time when they were still considered odd, before they morphed into mainstream culture and raised fewer eyebrows. I hope the collection will speak to an entire generation of self-described and closet geeks who grew up during this time. For those without intimate knowledge of the material, I endeavoured to exhibit, even expose, aspects of specific subcultures, shedding light on the basement dwellers who inhabit them.

The characters created for this collection fret and obsess over subcultural minutia, often with tribal authority. The details are what separate true fans from insufferable posers, and afford the characters a unique sense of place. Strong investments and desires are the lifeblood of this collection. They push narratives forward with great ease. I wrote the majority of the collection in first-person present tense in order to bring the reader as close as possible to each protagonist's mindset, feeling their fandom,

¹ Wright, Herbert, and D.C. Fontana. "Episode 19: Heart of Glory." *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Prod. Gene Roddenberry. 21 Mar. 1988. [Television](#).

obsession, and passion first-hand. Show, don't tell. That was the tactic beaten into our heads throughout the MFA, a strategy I've attempted to encapsulate in my format.

There exists a common stereotype in which geeks who live and game from the solitary confinement of their musty, wood-paneled basements are considered socially maladjusted or painfully introverted. This can be true, but sharing a nerdy love with those who truly appreciate it is too strong a force to keep hidden. Think of that time you absolutely adored that one band, that one game, that one activity that no one else seemed to know. Now remember the time you met that person who loved it as much as you. I bet sparks flew, excitement doubled and redoubled, and conversation blossomed. That kind of human interplay is worth exploring, worth sharing. I've attempted to capture something special through the matrices of social interaction in a realm where isolation is prevalent.

In any human group, there is hierarchy. With activities, events, or hobbies where there are no clearly established classes, roles, or rules, people vie to create the norm. Throughout my collection, characters occupying certain passions sharpen their beliefs or contextual understandings of their hobbies against those of others. This breeds competition, creates tension, and drives plot. Who has the audacity to claim that *Super Mario Brothers* was the pinnacle of gaming in the mid-eighties, when clearly it was *The Legend of Zelda*? There are aspects of bullying, power struggles, and master/pupil dynamics, as well as "individual versus community," and "individual versus environment" conflicts. The choices characters make through the fires of conflict reveal intrinsic truth about who they are, and unravel aspects of the subcultures they populate.

This collection is a work of entertainment. I love engaging readers through humour, and have threaded it throughout each story. Character interactions, dialogue, and actions work to deliver apparent and situational comedy. Elements of satire weave through the themes of each piece, specifically in the more dark-hearted tales.

Authors I've modeled my collection after include Douglas Coupland for his seamless ability to write characters and situate them in their own microcosm of culture (*J-Pod*, and *Microserfs*), Kurt Vonnegut and Neil Gaiman for their subtle stretches of reality and humour, and David Sedaris, whose essays and short stories are the apex of wit and unforgiving honesty.

The collection itself mirrors the works of David Carpenter's *Welcome to Canada* and George Saunders' *Pastoralia*. Like them, I situate a novella at the beginning, loaded with characters and action, then ease into a series of short stories with distinctly-voiced, memorable protagonists.

James Pepler

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DEDICATION

For those with unpopular passions

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"Thank you so much for to playing my game!"

-Mario (After the credits in *Super Mario 64*)